

Cultivating the Moral Character of Learning and Teaching:
A Neglected Dimension of Educational Leadership

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Introduction

This paper will propose some perspectives that might guide educational leaders (whether they be administrators or teachers) to address a neglected dimension of their work, namely the cultivation of the moral character of learning and teaching. The literature dealing with the preparation and professional development of educators is, by and large, bereft of a treatment of pupil learning as a moral activity, although we may find such treatments of the moral character of learning in the more general literature on education (e.g., Dewey, 1916; Dunne, 1993; Hogan, 1995; Starratt, 2003). This initial effort is seen as starting a conversation among scholars in the field of education, those practitioners who engage in the supervision of teachers, as well as those teachers they supervise. That conversation will fill out, refine, improve upon this initial argument as well as generate further perspectives and practices that cultivate and enhance the moral character of pupils' learning.

At the outset we need to clarify the focus of our argument. Much of the treatment of ethical leadership in education deals with what some ethicists would call General Ethics. General ethics deals with the ethics of everyday life, no matter the particular circumstances of the persons involved, for example, the ethics of truth telling, the ethics of sexual behavior, the ethics of

contractual agreements, the ethics of private property. Sometimes general ethics are expressed in negative prohibitions as might be found in the Ten Commandments. Sometimes general ethics are expressed as the practice of virtues, such as justice, compassion, care, generosity.

General ethics is distinguished from special ethics. Special ethics tends to be focused on the specialized relationships and the special work involved in the practice of a profession. Thus we find the development of special ethics around the health professions, the legal profession, the business profession, the engineering profession, the military profession. Those ethics focus on the quality and the boundaries of the relationships of between the professional and the client or colleagues. That focus also includes the good that is embedded in the work of the practice of the profession. In medicine, the good pursued is health; in law, the good pursued is justice; in business, the good pursued is the integrity of the commitment to produce a quality product or service for a fair price; in education the good pursued is learning.

Our focus today is the good embedded in learning, and the good embedded, therefore, in teaching. Our inquiry today has a very specific focus, namely on the moral character of learning the formal academic curriculum. The argument asserts that learning the formal academic curriculum can be and, furthermore, *ought to be* a moral activity as well as an intellectual activity. We will proceed, then, with an attempt to explore what the moral character of learning the academic curriculum might mean. We will also explore what kind of teaching might incorporate this understanding of the moral character of learning, not as a separate moment of instruction, but while in the very activity of attending to the intellectual or academic character of school learning. We conclude with some observations about how those holding administrative leadership positions might support teachers' attempts to cultivate both the moral and academic character of their pupils' learning.

The Moral Character of School Learning

Let us start with the question, “Why do we study what we study in school?” Policymakers today tend to answer, “So we can get a good job, can compete in an increasingly demanding and sophisticated work environment.” While preparation for participation in the work force is one important goal in education, it by no means is the only goal. In societies dedicated to human rights and civil liberties, schools are meant to help young people grow toward a fuller humanity—to develop what Melanie Walker refers to as “human capabilities” (Walker, 2004). The question could be rephrased as: “What difference does attention to these subjects make in our efforts to understand who we are, how we might live our lives, what we should value?” The answer to this question about the rationale behind the school curriculum is that these studies have much to do with basic human concerns (Broudy, 1964; Carr & Steutel, 1999; Dewey, 1916; Dunne, 1995; Hogan, 1995;). Our academic studies can (though not necessarily will) help us understand who we are as bio-physical beings (situated in the world of “nature” as represented by the natural sciences); as socio-cultural beings (situated in the world of culture and society as described by the arts and humanities as well as the social and human sciences); as historical beings (as belonging to communities whose traditions and journeys have a past, a present, and a future, and whose members have built that past and are expected to build its future).

As human beings, we are both embedded in and privileged by these worlds, bound to and in partnership with these worlds. These studies bring to light the intelligibility of these worlds and our own intelligibility as members of these worlds. These studies illuminate our relationships to these worlds so that we may participate in them with responsibility, integrity, and purpose. Participation in these worlds obviously means that the learning process involves not

only an intellectual appreciation of the architecture and grammar of these worlds (in the role of spectator, participant observer, or aesthetic critic) but also the gradual exercise of various practical skills to negotiate and engage these worlds (as autonomous and intentional agents, as fully functioning members of these worlds). These aspects of the learning process (*both* understanding *and* personal engagement) constitute the “good,” the intrinsic value of learning.

These studies can (again, not automatically will) gradually and cumulatively engage learners in a conversation, both personal and public, with these worlds in which they can ask: How do you work? How do you help me (us) understand how I (we) work? How is my (our) immediate life-world like your world? What do you teach me (us) about my (our) possibilities, my (our) limitations, my (our) responsibilities? How are you inside us and we inside you? With capable teachers, these studies can develop into on-going conversations between the worlds expressed and interpreted through the academic subjects that comprise the school curriculum, conversations where the learners listen to the voices of those worlds talk back to them, where the learners can become more fully present to those worlds and thus to the various relationships of the learners to those worlds – relationships that gradually reveal increasing complexity and responsibilities, relationships in response to which learners continue to shape their self-understanding both individually and communally.

Such a justification for engaging the school’s “subjects” at this level of learning seems to be lacking in the current articulation of the school’s learning agenda. Instead, we hear other metaphors: the curriculum is “delivered” by teachers to students who, in turn, “master” the curriculum, the mastery of which is revealed by identifying or producing preordained “right answers,” which are then tallied in numbers and percentages that reveal what the student has “achieved.”

Clearly, this understanding of learning refers to a one-way appropriation of a prefixed menu of abstract right-answers (no credit for left-answers) that are presumed to objectively correspond with the true and the real state of affairs, uniformly and universally agreed to by the adult world, if not the world of scholars (Shepard, 2002). There appears to be no concern, in the process of preparing for these tests, with either the self-knowledge of one's humanity in relationship to these worlds, nor with one's responsibilities to these worlds. Achieving right answers seems an end in itself, a sign of hard work and conformity to a dominant adult world that has constructed this artificial obstacle-course of puzzles, riddles, problems, abstract classifications, formulas, definitions and technical vocabulary, the mastery of which is supposed to predict a successful future.

The view of learning that is driven by mastery of right answers forces learning into a uniform time frame for all learners to learn a specific skill or understanding. "Mastery" of such learning is equated with speed – how fast can one accumulate sufficient information within the allotted class time in order to organize that information into right answers to the test questions within the limited time frame of the test itself. The test questions, moreover, are assumed to represent a legitimate sampling of the larger body of information delivered (though not necessarily learned) during the circumscribed time of instruction and study.

This arrangement of curriculum units into limited, one-size-fits-all time frames forces many, if not most learners to hurry up; to scramble for some scrap of what it is they perceive the teacher to expect them to have learned; to parrot out a phrase or definition just in time before the class or the test runs out of time; to guess at a right answer without having any clue as to why this constitutes a right answer. More often than not, learners are forced to make believe that they know what they do not know. Observe some students arguing with the teacher that they should

get partial credit for having a piece, however fragmentary, of the right answer. Within the game of “playing school,” one might agree that they should indeed get the partial credit, for their argument conforms to the simplistic logic of “getting the right answer” as the definition of academic achievement.

As I have argued elsewhere (Starratt, 2004, 2005), this test-fixated learning promotes an unethical type of learning. This type of learning is inauthentic and irresponsible; it promotes an attitude where the integrity of the worlds represented by the academic subjects is of no importance outside of its instrumentality in providing decontextualized right answers to someone else’s questions. This form of learning is posed learning--phony, fake, superficial learning. Indeed, this learning is morally harmful for it tends to program students to approach their world in a thorough-going self-referential and exploitative learning process that treats knowledge as the currency of the school system, as a commodity to be traded in the free market of school achievement. The learning process is thereby corrupted. Students are turned from an authentic encounter with the physical, the cultural, the historical worlds, to a pillaging of texts in search for answers to the teacher’s or the test makers’ questions.

Learning as Virtuous Activity

We can better understand the morality implied in learning when we see learning engage in three virtues: the virtue of presence, the virtue of authenticity, and the virtue of responsibility (Starratt, 2004). Virtues are ways of responding to the moral demands and opportunities proffered within the varying circumstances and settings of associated living (Flanagan & Jupp, 2001). Gouinlock (1993) suggests that virtues are responses organically related to actual problematic situations. Thus, there would be specific virtuous responses to problematic situations in the practice of architecture, or engineering, or teaching. The virtuous response would not only seek to avoid or

prevent harm in those practices, but would seek to promote the good organically embedded within practice. In other words the integrity of the practice of architecture or engineering or teaching would imply certain virtuous ways of practicing those professions and certain ways that would violate the integrity of the practice. The practice of learning has its own integrity which calls for certain virtues.

I propose that learning involves the virtues of presence, authenticity, and responsibility. One has to be present, as fully present as possible to the material or topic under study. Presence implies a dialogical relationship between the learner and the material under study. As with two persons, their mutual presence to each other make a relationship possible, a relationship bonded by telling and listening. Each person listens to the other's words, takes them in, and with the words, takes the other person inside as one interprets what the other's words mean. The listener then responds to the other, presenting in the response both the listener's interpretation of what the other has said, and also how the listener responds from his or her perspective or feelings to what the other has said. Thus the dialogue goes back and forth with people disclosing more of themselves and taking in richer and fuller understandings of the other.

If one of the parties to the dialogue becomes distracted and fails to be fully attentive to the other person then the mutuality of presence is diminished, if not broken; the integrity of the dialogue and the relationship that was developing is put in jeopardy. Frequently humans have ways of signaling the withdrawal of presence. They look at their watch, throw up their hands and declare that they must rush off for an appointment, but that they hope the dialogue can be resumed tomorrow or on some other occasion. Most of us, however, have experienced talking to another person who was barely half-present to us, who was obviously preoccupied with

something other than our fascinating story. We feel somewhat offended by the other's feigned responses of interest when it is obvious their mind is elsewhere.

The practice of the virtue of presence in the process of learning is something that itself is learned. Some teachers will explicitly teach it under the guise of study skills, or creating a readiness set at the beginning of class. There are ways of getting the learners' attention, motivating them to focus and concentrate in anticipation of learning something of personal value to them. As the lesson progresses, teachers increase the learner's attention by posing new questions, "If x is thus and so, what does that imply for y?" or "What does this situation suggest for its resolution?" The point behind the questions is to encourage the learner to listen to the intelligibility embedded in the subject matter talking back to the learner. The teacher is suggesting ways for the learner to be present to that intelligibility. Vygotsky (1984) suggests in his theory of learning that teachers bring the learners into the "zone of proximal development—that is, bring their presence up close, bring their attention to the threshold of dialogue with the subject matter. In scaffolding the students' attention with earlier learnings, the teacher gives the potentiality of dialogue a running start, so to speak.

While there are many nuances to being present, three seem particularly apropos in the activity of learning: 1) affirming presence, 2) enabling presence, and 3) critical presence. Affirming presence accepts the person or the event as it is, in its ambiguity, its incompleteness, its particularity, its multidimensionality. Enabling presence is open to the possibilities of the person or event to contain or reveal something special, something of deep value and significance. Critical presence expects to find both negative and positive features in persons and events. People and events and circumstances reveal unequal relationships of power and reciprocity. Critical presence brings to light what is tacit, assumed, or presumed in situations that reflected

human constructions and beliefs rather than something prefixed as necessary, as natural, as essential. All of these ways of being present to what is being studied enable the dialogue between learners and one or more of the worlds under consideration in that unit of the curriculum. Those kinds of presence of the learner enable those worlds to be similarly present as affirming who the learner is, as enabling the learner to realize her or his possibilities more fully, and as critiquing in appropriate assumptions and presumptions about their mutual relationships.

A second virtue that honors the integrity of learning is authenticity. The virtue of authenticity involves human beings in their most basic moral challenge, namely the challenge to be true to themselves, to be real. The opposite of that virtue is inauthenticity, playing false, making believe one is someone other than who one is. As with presence, the virtue of authenticity is a dialogical virtue. One cannot be authentic alone locked up in a closet. One is authentic in relationship to another. Authenticity is revealed in our actions, in our acting out the various social and cultural roles we play. Actions reveal the being behind the actions. Most basically one is authentic as a human being in response to one's own humanity and the humanity of the other. One is also authentic as a son or daughter, as a friend or lover, a father and a mother. In all of these roles, one strives to be real, not a fake or cardboard character. But the expression of our authenticity has to take into account the similar effort of others to be true to themselves as well. Authenticity supposes a kind of social contract, namely, that if I expect to be granted a certain latitude to be myself, to own my life and my choices, so too must I afford to others the latitude to chart the courses of their own lives (Taylor 1992).

The practice of learning asks of the learner that he or she acknowledge the world as what it is. Sometimes the worlds under study reveal beauty and harmony; sometimes they reveal complexity, conflict, arbitrary irrationality, seeming cruelty or malevolence. The learner's

integrity is connected to the learner's relationship to the various physical, social cultural, historical, religious worlds he or she is studying. Those worlds invite the learner into membership. Membership, however, imposes a recognition both of the benefits, and privileges, as well as responsibilities of membership. In other worlds, one's authenticity as a member of these worlds requires an acknowledgement (not necessarily approval) of the ways these worlds work as well as a commitment to value what is best and to fix what is broken in these worlds.

Authenticity, the way of being real, is a moral good. The learner pursues this way of being real, this way of expressing her or his goodness always in relationship to the realities of the worlds he or she inhabits, the truths of which are revealed through the activity of learning.

The practice of the virtues of presence and authenticity imply the third virtue that seeks the goods of the learning process – the virtue of responsibility. This virtue is exercised by learners (and by implication, by teachers) by respecting the goods of learning – namely the good of understanding and of participation in the worlds of nature, society, culture, and history.

This virtue is enacted in two ways. First, in the learning process itself, the learner adopts an attitude of respect toward what the learner is studying. The material under study, whether it be the genetic code, the physics of magnets, a poem of Wordsworth, an historical account of the battle of Richmond or the industrial revolution, a novel by William Faulkner or Katharine Ann Porter, the geography of Egypt or of Brooklyn – all have an integrity of their own. That is to say, they reveal how humans have represented the intelligibilities of the natural, the social, the cultural, and the historical worlds. The learner has a responsibility in the learning process to understand those worlds in their various intelligible manifestations – as they are in themselves, not as the learner would like them to be. These worlds are there not for the learners to possess them as their private property, but as the habitat of their own humanity, so to speak, as the

physical, social, cultural, and historical home for them, a home which supports their lives in all its dimensions, a home where learners can come to know who they are, a home which confers on them the important marker of membership in a community which both shapes the learners' identities and supports their necessary quest for an agency that is distinctive and authentic. As with all homes, however, there will be moments of pain as well as joy, moments of disappointment as well as satisfaction. Living at home requires patience, compassion, and commitment to negotiate what it takes to make that home work as a human community. That responsibility comes with one's membership and the relationships such membership implies.

The learner therefore does not enter into the learning process as a detached tourist, cavalierly and arbitrarily deciding whether to pay attention to what's in front of him or her. Rather, the learner chooses to be responsive to, and to respect the value and significance of that world, to listen to the lessons that world has to teach him or her. Thus, in the process of leaning, the learner makes the effort to listen and respond, to enter into dialogue with the worlds under study.

The virtue of responsibility is enacted in a second way, which flows immediately from the learners' effort to enter into dialogue with the world under study, and that is to listen to and reflect on what lessons that experience of the worlds have to teach them about living their lives, about defining themselves, about the obligations of membership in those worlds, about the unfinished agendas of those worlds, about the possibilities of agency within those worlds. Responsibility here is about re-ponding to the many significant potential lessons offered in these focused learning experiences of the physical, social, cultural, and historical worlds. If learning does not implicate us in those worlds, does not invite a response to these worlds, then why should we even bother to study them in the first place? What purpose is served by accumulating

an encyclopedic knowledge of the world if that knowledge provides no sense of who one is, no sense of how to live one's life, no sense of membership in the larger communities that make up these worlds, no sense of moral purpose? Indeed, the present insistence on accumulating this kind of encyclopedic knowledge in both a local and international competition for high test scores, seems to ignore these important questions, and thereby to eviscerate the moral character of learning (Carr & Steutel, 1999).

The Realpolitik of Accountability

Obviously, the politicians who set policies in education and the local, state and federal authorities who implement them are not about to change their test-driven approach to school learning after reading this essay. The present policy climate defining accountability measures in schools has generated such a momentum both in the United States and throughout many countries of the world that it will take time to play itself out before the inevitable cultural and political pendulum-swing eventually brings a greater balance between national uniformity and local autonomy in education (Shepard, 2002). Given the present policy climate, these virtuous approaches to authentic learning and teaching cannot be enacted in a thoroughgoing way. Rather, I suggest that educators shape *some* curriculum units to illuminate and activate the moral character of learning within those units. Along the way, teachers can show students both how to prepare for tests as well as to discover, at a deeper level, how these curriculum units can speak to student issues of identity, belonging, social responsibility, and self-fulfilling participation in the adult world. By experiencing some curriculum units explicitly through the exercise of the learning virtues of presence, authenticity and responsibility, say three or four a year, over the course of 8 to 12 years, learners would come to appreciate the activity of learning as serving both

extrinsic technical usefulness and intrinsic personal and civic moral purposes. I believe most teachers would readily embrace such a modest effort to transform the experience of learning from the tedious and exclusive emphasis on extrinsic and technical knowledge into learning that can serve both extrinsic and intrinsic values in learning.

A Model of Teaching That Attends to the Moral Character of Learning

Figure 1 presents a model of teaching and learning. In this model, the three ingredients of the moral character of teaching are highlighted. In one dimension of the triangle, the teacher establishes a working relationship with the learner based on caring and respect. The teacher accepts the learner as who he or she is, with all the advantages and limitations, talents and interests the learner brings to the work of learning. In the second dimension of the triangle, the teacher re-encounters the curriculum unit as revealing a world of significance and value to the teacher, a world that illuminates and makes possible the teacher's identity, sense of agency and participation in that world. In the third dimension, the teacher brings the learner and the curriculum unit into mutual dialogue through the teacher's careful construction and scaffolding of a variety of learning experiences shaped by the teacher's knowledge of the learner and the teacher's relationship to the world under study in that particular curriculum unit. Through these learning activities the student encounters the world revealed in that curriculum unit and is encouraged to appreciate how this part of that world speaks to him or her about who he or she is, about the possibilities for agency in that world, about the privileges and obligations of membership in that world, and about the unfinished agenda of that world. In the process of learning these lessons, the learner will, under the guidance of the teacher, also learn to express the intelligibility of the subject matter in responses to expected types of questions on the state

exam. Under the guidance of the teacher, the learners will also be encouraged to reflect on why these examination questions are deemed to be important for public life.

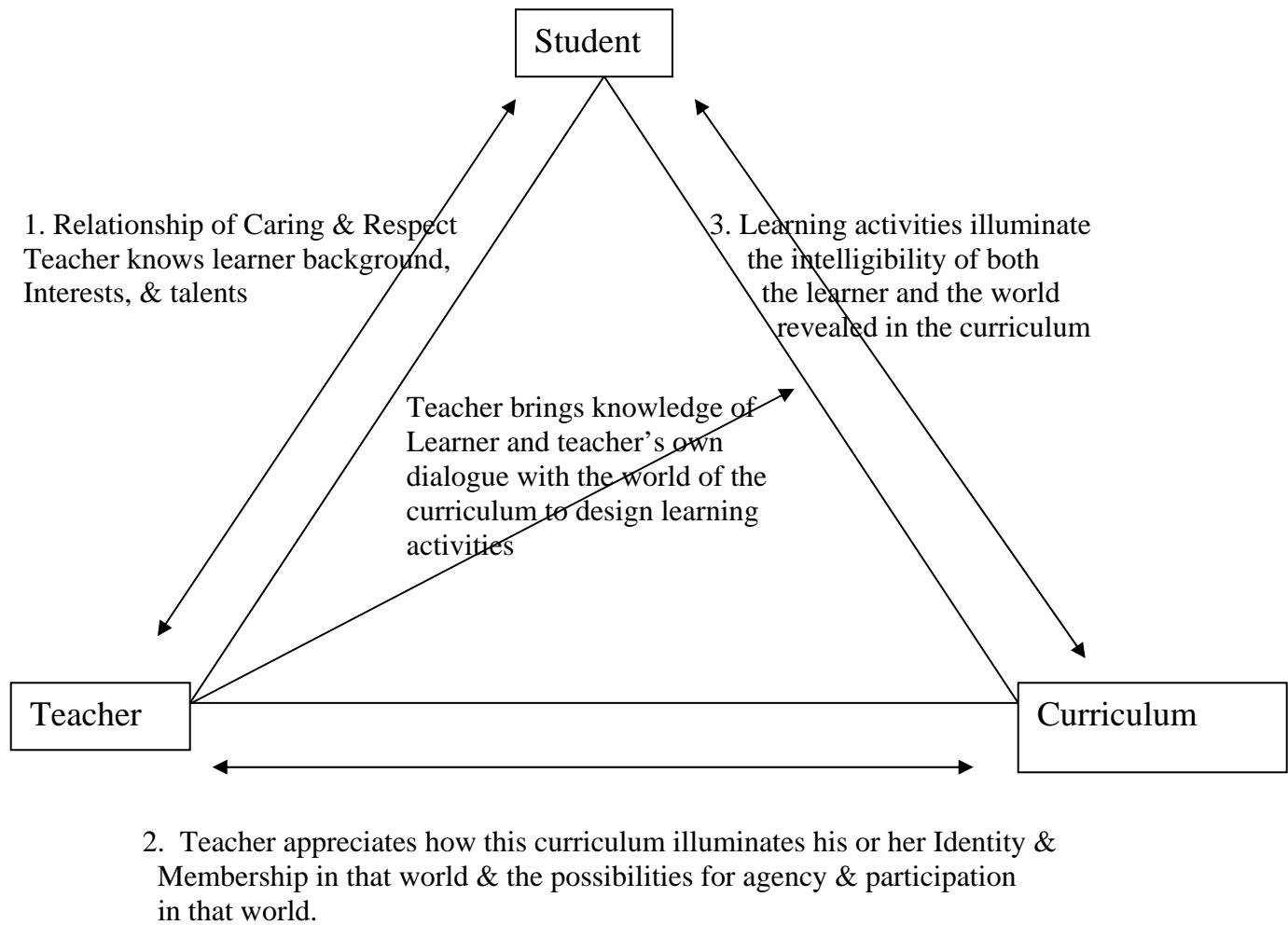


Figure 1. The Moral character of Teaching and Learning

By discussing the various dynamics of this model of the moral character of teaching and learning educators (whether teachers or administrators) can cooperatively develop an agenda of reflective practice and professional development with their teacher colleagues. This agenda may

begin with the teachers' realization that they do not adequately understand the learners' backgrounds, talents, and interests in order to scaffold the learning activities with this knowledge in mind. The teachers can then work out ways to gain that knowledge and appreciation of the learners as a necessary step in engaging them in authentic and responsible learning.

Another possible beginning might flow from the recognition that the teacher has not engaged the curriculum at this deeper level of moral dialogue and the mutual relationships with the worlds revealed through the curriculum. The teachers might collaboratively explore how those worlds engage their human identity and sense of agency, and communicate the privileges and obligations of membership in those worlds. These discussions could then lead to additional strategies for designing learning activities that bring the learner into a deeper level of dialogue with the curriculum unit. Kay Tolliver, the dynamic teacher in the Harlem section of New York City (FASE, 1995), illustrates the colorful and creative designs of learning activities that create such instructive dialogue. In turn, the process of designing learning activities can lead to the development of appropriate rubrics for self-assessment by the learner and assessment by the teacher.

All of the proceeding analysis of learning and teaching as both an intellectual and moral activity suggests some criteria for administrative and supervisory leadership at various levels of the school system. These criteria could guide the activities of different administrative leaders in different ways depending on the scope and focus of their responsibilities. If embraced system-wide, however, these criteria could go a long way to reestablishing the moral integrity of the work of learning and teaching.

Criteria for Promoting the Morality Intrinsic to Teaching and Learning

1. **Establish good working relationships with teachers and support staff based on respect for, and trust in, their professional and moral competence and based on genuine caring for them in their intrinsic goodness.** Teachers are under enormous pressures to make the schooling process more effective. Research studies indicate, however, that changing assumptions and beliefs embedded in teaching practices for generations is a slow and often painful process. On the other hand, the same research indicates the reservoir of good will and professional commitment that, under gentle but firm leadership, can energize the effort and lead to genuine change. Teachers will respond if their leaders are present to them and to the complexities of their own learning agendas (Goodwin, 2005; Paul, 2005; Tracey, 2005, Wai, 2005).
2. **Establish good working relationships with each student based on open communication, understanding of the students' cultural and immediate social environment, and on respect for the students' present talents, interests, and potential.** Unfortunately many efforts at school renewal engage the teachers in projects to improve learning, but do not enlist the participation of students (Keough, 2005). Absent such participation, students perceive the learning process as something that is “done to them,” rather than as actively engaging their ideas and experiences. Students need to feel cared for and to be thought of as having enormous potential, and to be needed by society—not simply to produce profits for their employers, but to heal the wounds, to carry forward the promise, to participate in the struggles of their world. They need to be taught as though the learning process was their sacred right and their

civic responsibility—a right that every human has: to learn who they are and how they can participate meaningfully in an adult world; a civic responsibility to know how to participate in the fulfilling work of communal self-governance and community betterment.

3. **Identify and articulate personal and civic values and meanings in the curriculum**

being taught. Teachers need to recapture the enthusiasm of their own learning, how their earlier studies opened up vistas of self-knowledge and meaningful participation in the world. They need to look beneath the expository texts and work sheets to ask how this material might have personal connections to the learners' experience, to their life-world, as well as to the more public worlds of their neighborhoods and local communities. Sometimes there is a cultural or racial disconnect between teachers and their students. Teachers will then need to empathetically inquire and discover what life looks like and feels like within the multicultural communities their students inhabit, so they can scaffold the learning activity with references to their family and neighborhood experience.

4. **Translate various units of the curriculum into personally and publicly**

meaningful learnings that connect with students' sense of identity, membership and participation in the natural, cultural and social worlds. Insofar as individual teachers can gather with other teachers who teach the same material to probe the personal and civic values and meanings in specific curriculum units, they would be able to collectively generate a rich reservoir of various strategies to uncover those meanings and values with their students. Each major unit of the curriculum should be related to the personal worlds of the learners and address the public applications of

that learning. Throughout, teachers should communicate the necessary interpenetration of personal meanings and public applications of the material under study, thereby bringing self-identity and social participation into mutually reinforcing relationship (Starratt, 1998).

5. **Cultivate a sense of responsible participation in the worlds reflected in the material under study in the classroom.** In most, if not all major units of the curriculum, teachers would encourage students to draw out three or more examples of how the curriculum unit implies a particular form of participation in public life, either on the level of interpersonal relationships, neighborhood concerns, possible careers for themselves, or local civic affairs. From time to time teachers would encourage comparisons of and debates about such examples.
6. **Develop with learners rubrics for personally authentic learning.** In order for learners to demonstrate to themselves and to others the moral quality of their learning, they need to create with their teachers some benchmarks that provide reasonable assurances of such quality in their work. The practice of this kind of self-assessment should gradually deepen their appreciation of how they come to know themselves and their responsibilities to the worlds they are learning about, as well as replace their exclusive reliance on the teacher's judgment about the quality of their learning. As students become increasingly adept at such self-assessment, they will be on the road to becoming more responsible for and to their learning.

Conclusion

At the start of this essay, I asserted that the moral character of learning was a neglected dimension in the theory and practice of school leadership. The burden of most of the

essay was to illuminate that moral character of learning through an exposition of those moral virtues embedded in the very activity of authentic, integral learning. These virtues, I argued, are not a kind of value-added, icing-on-the-cake supplement to the more basic intellectual character of learning. On the contrary, they are essential for the very intellectual quality of learning; without them what passes for learning in schools can easily become superficial, vacuous, artificial, make-believe, frivolous, and possibly dishonest. If that argument is at all valid, then school leaders and all teachers need to evaluate what they do in the light of the moral character of learning. The argument suggests that they might need to develop the very virtues that support the moral character of learning in their own roles as guides and facilitators of learning (Starratt, 2004). Those who would lead in *collaboration with* teachers in cultivating the many dialogical relationships implied in studying the worlds contained in the academic curriculum, will need to nurture those virtues of presence, authenticity, and responsibility in themselves, not only as adult models for the students, but in all the organizational support activities they engage in to make learning come alive for their young charges.

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